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ABSTRACT

Although most learning disabled (LD) adult learners have a strong desire to enhance their writing skills, many obstacles hinder their success. Characteristics of LD students found in their writing or actions include the following: frustration; poor study/note taking skills; test anxiety; lack of social skills; a difficult time following oral directions; trouble keeping up with group conversations; hard time with the act of handwriting; and reading, spelling, and remembering problems. LD students write less than normally achieving students and have great difficulty organizing their ideas. A whole language class offers these benefits: students spend more time writing; the classrooms are aimed at creating environmental conditions believed to foster self-regulation and self-confidence; and the classrooms place considerable emphasis on the integrative nature of learning. Another instructional technique that seems to have a positive effect on LD writers is the Landmark Method. It emphasizes the interrelatedness of reading, writing, speaking, and listening; metacognition; teacher patience; and teaching to the student's strengths and accommodating learning styles. The commonalities of the approaches are as follows: stress on the importance of making students active participants in the learning process; incorporation of the importance of collaboration among students; teacher-motivators who model; patient teachers; and combination of reading and writing instruction. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research to Practice

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WORKING WITH LEARNING DISABLED WRITERS: SOME PERSPECTIVES

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By Bryan Bardine

During my career as an adult educator, I have spent a great deal of my time in the classroom trying to help my students improve their writing skills. The vast majority of my students had some type of learning disability, and trying to work with my students and approach their writing instruction in a way that would best help them became a very complex and often frustrating task both for me and for my students. It was obvious that most of them had a strong desire to enhance their writing skills, but an inordinate number of stumbling blocks seemed to get in the way of their success. Now, having left my job as an instructor to begin working on a doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction, I find I have both the resources and the time to look for better ways to work with the learning disabled (LD) writer. I believed I needed to learn more about some methods of instructing the LD writer before I could successfully re-enter the classroom. This article will focus on several things. First, I will look at some characteristics of LD students in general and LD writers more specifically. I will then discuss and examine several teaching methodologies and strategies that seem to be successful for LD writers.

Some Characteristics of LD Students

Most of us who teach will work with students who have learning disabilities, but what does it mean to be learning disabled? Certainly, the term is used often enough, but how is it defined? Caryl K. Sills, in her article "Success for Learning Disabled Writers Across the Curriculum," cites a 1992 study that explains students with learning disabilities: "despite average or above average intellectual ability, students with a perceptual impairment have varying degrees of difficulty in receiving and/or expressing information" (p. 66). Further, she writes that "the problem is usually a result of a permanent central nervous system dysfunction that causes the learner to receive inaccurate information through his or her senses and then to have trouble processing that information" (p. 66). It is important to stress that many LD students, as the article points out, have at least average intellectual ability, which means that as teachers we need to develop instructional methods to help them better process the information that we are teaching. In most cases the students can be successful if we help them accurately receive the instructional information.

What are some characteristics of learning disabled students that we can look for through their writing and/or actions? Sills points out that LD students "often have poor self-esteem, are easily frustrated, have poor study/note taking skills, are anxious about tests, and lack social skills" (p. 67). Further, Judy L. Martin, in her article "Removing the Stumbling Blocks: 25 Ways to Help our Learning Disabled College Writers," lists several possible signs that a student may have some type of learning disability. LD students may have a difficult time following oral directions; have trouble keeping up with group conversations; have a hard time with the act of handwriting; or have reading, spelling, and remembering problems. Martin comments that "how we interpret student behavior determines how we react to that student" (p. 286). Essentially, it's crucial that we be very careful about the way we treat students who may have a learning disability. Carolyn O'Hearn (1989) explains that the most important decision that composition teachers can make "is to understand that learning disabled students do not submit illegible, error-filled papers out of laziness, carelessness, or perversity" (p. 302). We mustn't assume that our students are not trying to be successful; in most cases their disability is getting in the way of their success.

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Often, when LD students write essays or writing samples, several things may be evident. First, "learning-disabled students of all ages write less than normally achieving students," and they "have great difficulty organizing their ideas"(Stoddard, 1987 p.15). Further, LD student composing processes can be negatively affected by the aforementioned problems of poor spelling and handwriting, and the "other important mechanics of capitalization, punctuation, and paragraphing. . . " (p. 16). Also, a recent study found support for the information listed above, and the researcher decided to find out why students produce such weak writing. Steve Graham (1992) found that "one reason relates to how they go about the process of composing" (p.135). Graham asked some LD students to respond to the prompt "Should boys and girls play sports together?" He found that "by and large, the students converted the writing assignment into a question-and-answer task, simply stating 'yes' or 'no,' then quickly telling whatever came to mind, and then abruptly ending their responses" (p. 135). Graham found that these students did little or no planning and "the whole process usually took about six minutes" (p. 135). This study can be helpful because we can see that LD students may need to learn prewriting exercises such as mapping and brainstorming in order to develop and focus their ideas on the writing task. As teachers, it is important for us to understand the types of problems that our learning disabled students will be facing, but it is not enough to know what the problems are–we also have to know how we can help our students overcome these difficulties. The next section of this article will focus on some whole language teaching methods or strategies that other researchers have found to be helpful with their LD writers.

The Whole Language Philosophy

Whole language instruction is a term that refers to one way that some teachers view "language and literacy" (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1995, p. 26). Whole language teachers believe that "language, whether it is oral or written, cannot be divided into discrete subskills for instruction because the act of segmenting and focusing on a target 'subskill' changes the linguistic process"(Keefe & Keefe, 1993, p. 172). The authors use a good example by saying that one cannot learn to ride a bike by practicing pedaling, balance, steering, and braking separately–they all must be done together. Further, Graham and Harris (1994) write that students in whole language classes "should make choices about what they read and write, have time to read and write, take ownership and responsibility for their learning, and evaluate their efforts and progress" (p. 276).

Essentially, proponents of whole language believe that reading and writing, as well as other language skills, should be taught together to enable the students to learn each of the skills most effectively. Keefe and Keefe (1993) believe that those who work with LD students need to immerse their students in language. Teachers can fill the classroom with things such as "calendars, advertisements, wall charts, and menus" (p. 173). In the teaching of writing, student immersion takes place by writing for extended periods each day in their journals, to one another, to the teacher or for their own projects that they develop.

Teachers play an important role in helping their LD students. Because many LD students have low self-esteem, it's important for teachers to positively influence them. Basically, "rather than calling attention to what a learner cannot do, the teacher boosts the confidence of learners who have lost faith in their ability"(Keefe & Keefe, 1993, p. 174). For example, writing teachers should first emphasize the good things that their students did on their assignments, then constructively go over a few areas that need improvement.

There has not been a significant amount of research done with the whole language methodology and the teaching of writing to adults, but one point that is evident, according to Graham and Harris (1994), is that "students in whole language classes held a meaning-based view of writing, whereas their peers in conventional classes viewed writing from a skills perspective" (p. 278). The difference seems to be that when whole language students write, their focus is on the "total package," that is, what they are saying and how it is being said, whereas students in conventional classes often focus more on specific, individual skills such as punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing.

What benefits would a whole language class offer for an LD writer? Generally, whole language classrooms offer more time spent writing. Students in these classes will be writing more often and on topics of their choosing–something that is rarely the case in more traditional classrooms. Another important benefit is that whole language classrooms, because of principles "such as choice, ownership, self-evaluation, peer collaboration, and a supportive environment, are aimed at creating environmental conditions believed to foster self-regulation and self-confidence"(Graham & Harris, 1994, p. 280). Finally, whole language classrooms place "considerable emphasis on the integrative nature of learning" (p. 282). For example, whole language instructors see the importance of teaching reading and writing together for the benefit of the student. So, whole language instruction can help LD writers. Because of its emphasis on the integration of learning, more time spent writing in the classroom, self-regulation, ownership, emphasis on meaning-based outcomes, and the more supportive environment for the writer, whole language methods are effective tools for helping the LD writer.

The Landmark Method

Another instructional method that seems to have a positive effect on LD writers is the Landmark Method. Jacob Gaskins wrote about this method (1995) in his article "Teaching Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities: The Landmark Method." Gaskins visited the Landmark Institute, a nationally recognized and accredited college for dyslexic and learning disabled students. During the time he spent at the institute, he learned their ten teaching principles and reviewed them in his article. Several seem beneficial for adults.

The first educational principle that Gaskins writes about is that teachers should "exploit the inter-relatedness of reading, writing, speaking, and listening" (p. 117). Essentially, Gaskins points out that students will "write as they talk," so the Landmark faculty try to "help students talk like they are going to write" (p. 117). Activities such as "answering questions, incorporating other students' perspectives, marshaling points, and expatiating for a real audience" are stressed at the institute (p. 117). Teachers at the institute believe that by doing this in the classroom the students will transfer this activity to their writing. Further, students take speech classes at the same time as their writing classes, and everyone participates in each class. The active participation of students in class discussion and group work is parallel to much of what goes on in the whole language classroom.

The Landmark Institute also emphasizes metacognition. Metacognition is best explained as the way students think about how they do something–in this case, how they learn to write. Gaskins comments that the teachers at the Institute do this by accommodating students' individual learning styles, using the process approach to writing instruction, encouraging collaboration and group work among students, and using their (Landmark's) own portfolio system for determining grades. These four things are designed to aid the students in the development of the way they think of themselves as writers specifically and learners in general.

The Institute philosophy also stresses that teachers need to be patient with their writers. Gaskins writes that "the problems of LD students are not easily or quickly solved" (p. 120). Many of the principles discussed throughout this article overlap, and being patient is certainly one of them. It is crucial to remember that LD students will often come into a writing situation with low self-esteem and with even lower confidence that they can write effectively. As teachers, we must give them confidence and a sense of empowerment so that they don't falter at the first sign of trouble in their writing. Learning is a slow process for many students, but it can be a huge step in their development as writers.

A final characteristic of the Landmark Method is that teachers need to "teach to the student's strengths and accommodate learning styles" (p. 119). Essentially, the Institute stresses that teachers "teach in a variety of modalities" (p. 119). Landmark teachers need to be very adept at altering their teaching methods to fit their students' different learning modalities. For instance, one student had a difficult time outlining her ideas for a paper, but the teacher knew that she had strong visual-spatial abilities, so the student built three dimensional models with "construction manipulatives" which helped her "see logical relationships among ideas more clearly" (p. 119). Another example is that students who "excel at speaking are encouraged to 'talk out' their ideas before composing" (p. 119). By being aware of student strengths and weaknesses, teachers are able to accommodate their students' needs, thus helping their learning process.

Some Commonalities

What common threads can be seen running through these two approaches that will help us as teachers? Each stresses the importance of making students active participants in the learning process. Student immersion in writing, more specifically, and language use in general has been shown to have a positive effect on their learning. By surrounding them with written communication, we can show students the importance of writing in our everyday lives. Further, by immersing students in writing using a variety of assignments designed to work with their strengths, the importance of writing will be continuously enhanced. We can no longer assume that students will be able to learn through the drilling, memorization, and repetition practiced in the past.

Both of these approaches incorporate the importance of collaboration and working together between students. Often, much of the best learning takes place when students work together on projects of their choosing–with only supplemental support and guidance from the instructor. A third thread for teachers is certainly that we need to act as motivators by modeling in the classroom. Students will follow our lead. By displaying a positive attitude about our classroom and writing instruction we are providing a solid base from which the students can begin their learning. We are their primary support in the classroom, and students will interpret much of what we say and do to be our attitude toward writing. We must always be sure to maintain a clear focus on our individual reasons for working with this population–so that students benefit from their time in our classrooms.

Fourth, patience is critical to our success as teachers and our students' success as learners. We need to remember that LD students are not being lazy or trying to make mistakes in their writing. In most cases, the disability impedes their progress. By being patient and using our skills to create new assignments that make our

students' development as writers more constant, we are helping them begin to feel a sense of empowerment and improved self-esteem that is so vital for them to improve as writers and learners.

A final thread that seems to be implicit in these instructional methods is the importance of combining reading and writing instruction for the LD writer. As teachers, we need to use activities that combine these two skills, such as those that Rasinski and Padak advocate in Holistic Reading Strategies: Teaching Children Who Find Reading Difficult (1996). These reading strategies, along with the informal writing opportunities that are an integral part of student learning, can play a major role in an LD writer's success. Activities such as Think-Pair-Share, Agree/Disagree, and Bleich's Heuristic provide opportunities for students to read, predict, write about, and discuss pieces of writing.

Thus far, whole language practices and the Landmark Method seem to be having positive effects on LD student writing. It's imperative as teachers that we learn more about these methods through research, our own trial and error, and collaborating with colleagues. The LD writer, no matter what age, faces an uphill struggle without the proper type of instruction and classroom support system. We can provide these things by continuing to be students ourselves–always searching for the best ways to work with our learning disabled students.

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